DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 289 182 CS 505 728

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TITLE Observation Projects: People-Watching for Fun and Learning.
PUB DATE Sep 87
NOTE 16p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Speech Association of Minnesota (Northfield, MN, September 1987).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Guides - Classroom Use - Guides (For Teachers) (052)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Cognitive Processes; Data Collection; *Educational Trends; Evaluation; Group Dynamics; Higher Education; *Interpersonal Communication; Learning Processes; Learning Strategies; *Observational Learning; Research Methodology; Secondary Education; Student Participation; *Teaching Methods

ABSTRACT

In keeping with the trend toward active, participative learning, observation projects for speech communication students can allow them to experiment with designing and carrying out a study of human communication. Students can be encouraged to look at the dynamics of a church congregation, a courtroom, a pre-game football huddle, or an office, and try to interpret the types of communication behavior they see. Moreover, they can be encouraged to connect their observations with research literature they read. While observation projects may have their drawbacks, such as interfering with or influencing the communication being observed, they are invaluable for making learning meaningful. Teachers can help produce higher quality projects if they do the following: (1) provide students with helpful observation techniques and collection methods, and reinforce the importance of the observation record; (2) anticipate and discuss with students the frustrations of this type of research; (3) take a nondirective approach to criticism of projects; (4) provide periodic guidance, including conferences with students having difficulties; (5) require periodic progress reports; (6) have students prepare an annotated bibliography; and (7) provide students with guidance in organizing the written report. Such projects can give students skills, attitudes, and knowledge that govern behavior beyond their school years. (One note and eighteen references are included.) (JC)

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OBSERVATION PROJECTS: PEOPLE-WATCHING FOR FUN AND LEARNING

by

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Presented at the annual meeting of the
Speech Association of Minnesota
Northfield, MN September 1987

Also submitted to the Speech Communication Teacher

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John Naisbitt, in his best-selling text Megatrends, proclaims that an ethic of participation is sweeping the country. While he primarily directs this observation toward the evolution of participatory democracy and the participatory corporation, it is not unreasonable to project the carryover of such an attitude into the classroom. Such a prevailing attitude affects not only student demand for learning experiences, but curricular adjustment to satisfy such demand. Widespread use of internships, early field experiences, simulations, mock organizations, and applied learning projects currently allow the student to "participate" in education.

The fact that participation enhances learning is not new or surprising. Several principles from learning theory point directly and indirectly at this relationship. We know, for instance, that active participation is preferable to passive participation, that meaningful responses are learned more easily than meaningless ones, and that reinforcement helps in establishing response (Bettinghaus, 1973). Students who become actively involved in a particular learning experience find that class time passes more quickly and that more information is subsequently retained. If students are able to make sense out of concepts by connecting the new with the familiar (i.e., through cognitive participation), learning and retention is strengthened. Whenever students can have newly acquired material reinforced through their own experiences, the "aha" phenomenon occurs in which learning is again enhanced.

Those concerned about upgrading the educational experience so

as to involve the students more in their learning have numerous available options. Certainly one of the most popular techniques involves active answer-seeking as opposed to passive answer-absorbing or shared problem awareness versus regurgitating memorized answers.[1] Developing a norm of active, spontaneous dialogue among students and teachers is sometimes difficult, but gets students participating in the learning experience. Other techniques include use of student reports, discussion groups, study modules, peer evaluation, role playing, simulations, brainstrorming sessions, and so forth. While the techniques have their value as well as their shortcomings, they all profess to get students to "participate" in learning. In a discipline such as speech communication, this becomes exceedingly important so that students gain practice in communication skills as well as understanding of content.

One technique that can be especially useful for developing participation-enhanced learning in many speech communication courses is the use of the term observation project. The balance of this paper will present a case for its usefulness and will provide a set of guidelines for incorporating such an approach in the college classroom. This author's use of the observation project has proved successful in nonverbal communication, interpersonal communication for business and the professions, and small group communication. Others may find it adaptable to other courses they teach.

OBSERVATION PROJECTS: A RATIONALE

One cannot scoff at the value of learning through observation. Thirteenth century philosopher Roger Bacon (1928)

writes of two modes of acquiring knowledge: reasoning and experience. Experience, he says, amplifies and solidifies that discovered through reasoning. Italian philosopher Rosmini-Serbati (1893) writes that one function of the human mind which seeks truth yet unknown is to attain data by observation and experience. Learning is achieved by a perceptive-inductive method in which not only are conclusions drawn from previously known data, but new data and new perceptions are acquired in the process. A widely-used text on present-day behavioral research, while cautioning about making incorrect inferences from observation, notes that a primary advantage of the method allows the observer to bring together behavior and construct:

> Important as is asking about behavior, there is no substitute for seeing, as directly as possible, what people actually do when confronted with different circumstances and different people (Kerlinger, 1973, p. 554).

Certainly, learning by observation and conducting any sort of observational research are not free from criticism. One primary complaint is that the outside observer cannot completely know or understand what is being observed. While this may be true, the "outsider" can provide a perspective that is valuable. Olson (1977) indicates that outsiders can provide data on a reality that is objective (which is distinguished from the "insider's" subjective reality). In doing research, he encourages the use of both perspectives. This idea is echoed by Pearch (1977) who discusses the value of using both a naturalistic and objectivistic approach to the study of conversation. He goes on to say that naturalistic research is "prized as a procedure for observing complex relationships between variables" (p. 52).

Another common criticism of the observational approach is that the presence of the observer may affect the phenomenon under study. Heyns and Lippitt (1954) suggest that this is not a severe problem since individuals being observed adapt to the presence of the observer. If possible, students should be encouraged to adopt what Knapp (1978, p. 379) calls the "potted palm" approach in which they try to stay out of action being observed. This reduces any possible influence the observer may have on the observed. Students generally discover that if they try to participate fully in the phenomenon and observe at the same time that their efforts are severely hampered.

Limitations of the observer in terms of knowledge of theory causes some to worry that little will be gained from observation. Indeed, this is a worry of students who appear in the office at midterm bemoaning the fact that they are seeing a lot, but they aren't sure what they are seeing! It is at that point that students should be reminded that

> . . . the effective observer should be able to maintain a delicate balance between assuming the knowledgable role as an expert in his or her field and the ignorance and wide-eyed naiveté of a child or alien from Mars (Knapp, p. 380).

Generally, the student who makes this complaint has not done sufficient background reading or is lax in examining the observational record. Encouragement, suggested readings, and patience generally finds the troubled student discovering meaningful patterns in the object of observation.

Incorporation of an observation project can enhance student learning of abstract concepts and provide an outlet for both the application of and conduct of research. Learning, according to

Webster, is the act of gaining knowledge or skill. In the typical college classroom, learning might be described as the joining together of research, theory, and application (See Fig. 1.).

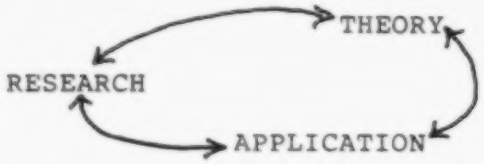

Figure 1: A Generalized Model of Student Learning

Typically, courses may focus on each area in varying degrees, but may not teach the student to see the bridging points between the areas. Students gain a feel for research done in an area by reading and discussing key articles and texts. Lecture material and the required textbook help them to appreciate the body of theory associated with the topic under study. If they are lucky, through examples, self awareness, or through experiences occurring simultaneously with classroom exchange, students may come to see extra-academic application of this material. But, do they come to appreciate how research shapes theory and how theory-building suggests research needed? Do they come to understand how sometimes tedious studies have relevance in practical applications and how common occurrences can suggest exciting research opportunities? Do they come to realize that an understanding of theory can aid in understanding human relations applications outside of the classroom? And, do they develop a critical thinking competence that allows them to witness an occurrence and then question how or why it occurred from numerous theoretical vantage points? Without guidance, these connections may not be made.

If, as educators, our mission is to develop these competencies, participative-learning projects like observation projects

which are coupled with a written report can prove useful. This type of "classroom research" can tell us far more about what the student understands about applied communication than any standard term paper since the student must extrapolate from what was observed.

Borrowing Booth's (1961) characteristics of the literary narrator, Hickson (1983) provides a model for ethnomethodological research which may show what results from this approach to student learning. An adaptation of Hickson's model is presented in Fig. 2.

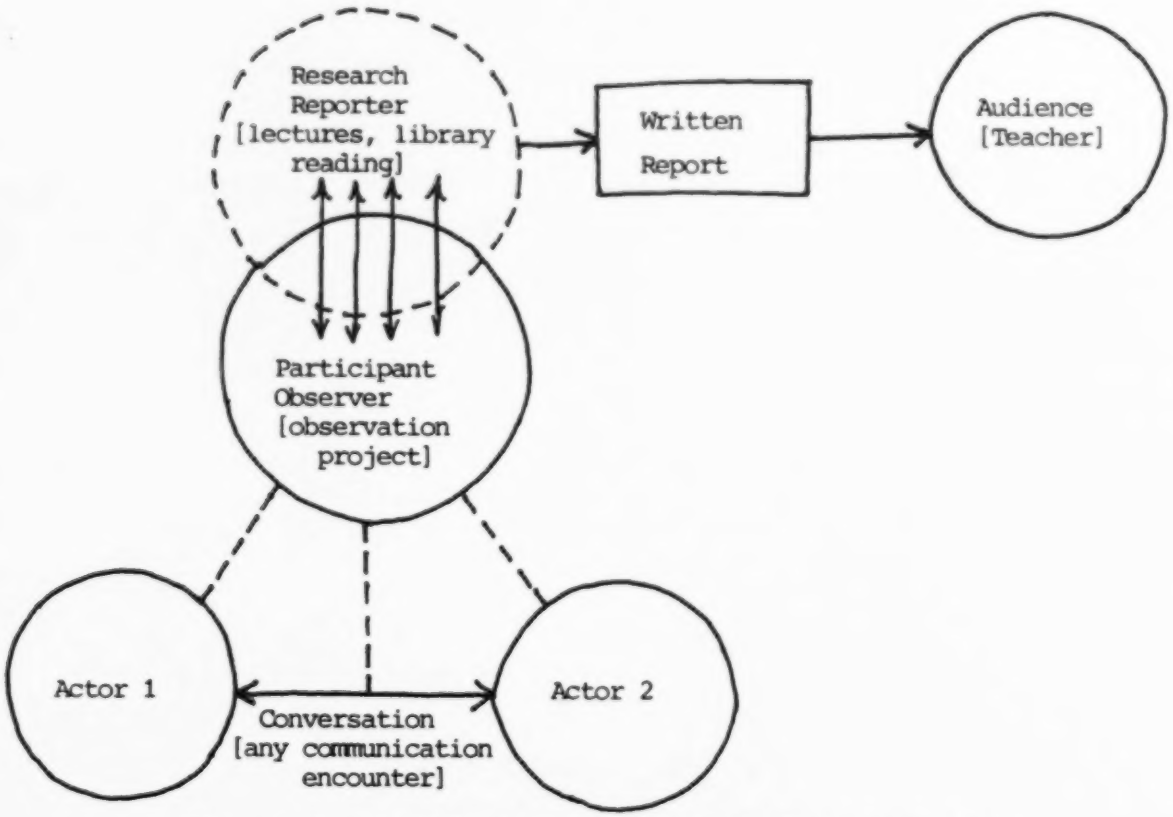

Figure 2: An Adapted Model of Student Learning

As students struggle to make sense out of what they observe by returning again and again to the theories and findings of others, they develop a better view of the communication encounter and the

actors within it. Hence, the neglected interplay of theory, research, and application begins to occur. Students become more aware of contextual constraints, their personal biases, intervening variables, and possible difficulties in their methodologies as they prepare a written report for their teacher. Students report that this type of project is the most difficult kind of writing they have had to do, but, at the same time, the most exciting.

GUIDELINES FOR IMPLEMENTATION

Instructors wishing to incorporate observation term projects into their teaching will find them to be of higher quality if they follow these guidelines:

1. Provide students early in the term with guidance in conducting observations.

Students have been trained to do standard library research. They are often puzzled when given free reign to people-watch. It is helpful to spend a class session discussing how to observe, pros and cons of various observational techniques, methods of collecting field notes, and the importance of the observational record. Lists of questions to ask when observing or pertinent articles on observation research may be distributed. Conducting whole-class observations of a filmed communication encounter or engaging in fishbowl exercises followed by group processing can sharpen student skills.

2. Anticipate and discuss with students the frustration of doing this type of research.

Sometimes students will try to take in too much at one time or will design such a microscopic study that they miss much rich information. Office conferences can allow the instructor the

chance to streamline or broaden the scope of suggested projects. Try not to discourage students from projects that excite them. The football player who learns about the importance of subtle nonverbals and cohesiveness through pre-game ritual, or the aspiring politician who attends township board meetings may find the experiences very enlightening and learn a great deal from the project.

3. Take a more nondirective approach to criticism. Often you will automatically see flaws in a student's project. Sitting in a church pew and attempting to watch nonverbal facial expressions from the congregation is difficult when you are all facing the minister! If you see a flaw, pose some pertinent questions and let the students wrestle with the problem. Students are much more pleased with themselves and their projects when they discover and work around the limitations. They also learn how to be critical of research projects they later encounter.

4. Provide periodic guidance with projects. It is helpful to the student to have key concepts, chapters in the text, or selected readings suggested to them at the appropriate time--what may be thought of as the "frustration point." One young man, a part-time bouncer in a local drinking establishment, found Telling Lies by Paul Ekman (1985) a particularly valuable resource for his project on detecting underage drinkers. A pre-law student who was fascinated by legal communication styles in the office versus the courtroom found Power!: How to Get It, How to Use It by Michael Korda (1975) very interesting. It is wise to keep copies of exceptional projects and lists of all

previously done projects. Have these available as models and idea stimulators, but be careful not to distribute them too early. Let the students be creative on their own at first.

5. Require formal progress reports to both motivate and maintain contact with students.

Have students form hypotheses, design observation sheets of their own, investigate related literature, and summarize observation notes at least twice during the term. As a graded project, it encourages students to make headway early on and discover potential shortcomings in their own research. The instructor's feedback on these progress reports might suggest refinements or library resources plus give a student encouragement to continue. The instructor can readily spot students who are having difficulties since progress reports of those students will lack coherence and depth. These students can be invited in for a personal (yet, nonthreatening) conference. Students report that these progress checks are invaluable for keeping them to task.

6. Have students prepare an annotated bibliography of outside readings consulted in conjunction with their observation project.

Encourage the use of a variety of print resources and indices. Students will discover that good research (not just quick research done to satisfy a research paper requirement) takes time and creative investigation. Students report pleasure when they find useful sources that help explain phenomena they observe. Submission of an annotated bibliography allows the instructor to assess the quality of research and places weight on the necessity for good background reading. It is suggested that the instructor make note of sources that students found particularly valuable

for sharing with other students who do similar projects in the future.

7. Provide students with guidance in organizing the written report.

Because students are so used to the standard term paper, they may be at a loss as to how to organize this type of paper. Having them read selected journal articles may help them determine subheadings, but be sensitive to the fact that for the young student many articles are far too sophisticated. Discussing terms like literature review, hypotheses, methodology, limitations, and findings is important. Encouraging students to prepare a preliminary outline for your examination is a possible approach to take.

CONCLUSION

The move is on to develop a more literate and competent society, and education is given the task of developing such in the youngsters we encounter in the classroom. Yet, how do we begin? Katula and Martin (1984) tell us that "it is in a concerted effort to provide students with skills in critical thinking about their ideas and their discourse" (p. 160) that we may meet the challenge. Phillips (1984), wrestling with the definition of competence, indicates it is a potential and that "competencies can be derived from observed behaviors and classified into situational categories" (p. 32).

If our aim as educators is to develop student competence with respect to the future, then we should, as Shane and Shane (1974) suggest, provide instruction that imparts skills, attitudes, knowledge and convictions to govern behavior past the actual time of formal schooling. They propose "a closer linkage of the individual to the purposes of his experiencing" (p. 186), content in-

volvement of the learner as a resource. Unfortunately, according to Toffler (1974), many schools are not designed to test reality, but are instead set up to build and transmit abstractions. He says that with the rate of change in our society today we must test the abstractions by frequently moving back and forth between theory and practice. Observation projects are vehicles for this maneuver.

NOTES

[1]These are just some of the directions for curriculum change suggested by J. G. Shane, H. G. Shane, R. L. Gibson, and P. F. Munger (1971), pp. 137-151.

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